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FEATURE MATERIAL

"FLAPJACK DEVILFISH" BECOMING MORE PREVALENT, INTERIOR DEPARTMENT SAYS

One of the ocean's strangest creatures, the "flapjack devilfish," is being found with increasing frequency off the Pacific Coast of the United States, the Department of the Interior has announced.

The flapjack was officially christened Opisthoteuthis californiana in 1949 by Dr. S. Stillman Berry after he studied two of the creatures at Stanford University.

Dr. Berry determined that the unusual fish was a species of octopus, one of seven species in this group found in various parts of the world.

Flapjack's entry into scientific journals was considered one of the most unusual additions to the known fauna of the Pacific Coast in many years.

The harmless, strange-appearing octopus actually is not rare. It was known to shrimp fishermen off northern California before 1949, and in recent years research vessels of Interior's Bureau of Commercial Fisheries have taken several specimens during deep-water exploratory fishing operations. Altogether there are records of 39 catches.

The jellyfish-like octopus has been found from Eureka Bar, California, to Albatross Gully in the Gulf of Alaska. It has been found at depths ranging from 68 to 450 fathoms (408 to 2700 feet). The adult is about 12 inches in diameter and weighs approximately three pounds.

The flapjack has eight arms, but they are connected nearly to their tips by a flabby web that forms a thick umbrella. The body is gelatinous and rusty brown with patches of blue. Above the two large eyes is a pair of paddle-like fins.

When the octopus is in the water, the fins flap up and down to help provide locomotion. The umbrella-like body spreads into the shape of a bell and begins to pulsate like a jellyfish.

Fish and Wildlife Service authorities said little is known about the life of the flapjack. It is believed to live on the ocean floor despite its emulation of the jellyfish while swimming. An examination of several of the octopuses shows that they feed on tiny crustaceans, such as shrimps. Mature females have been found to contain from 225 to 475 eggs.

Captured flapjacks have lived up to two days in an aquarium, but this short survival time is believed to be due to injury while being brought up in a trawl, rather than to a changed environment.

The octopus probably could be kept indefinitely in captivity if it were caught uninjured and kept in water at about 40 degrees, the Interior Department said.

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